

A QUARTER CENTURY AT THE LIBRARY

by

David C. Morrow

A Quarter Century at the Library

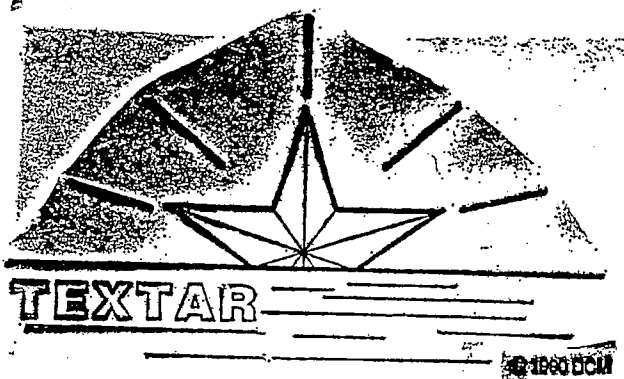
Published by

**Textar Media, Inc.
P. O. Box 7308
Corpus Christi.
Texas 78467-7308**

Copyright 2002 by David C. Morrow

ISBN 0-9641836-8-4

Printed in Texas
2002



For just over twenty-five years my mother, Mary Richardson Morrow, and my aunt, Polly Richardson Walker, worked for the Corpus Christi Library System. They started at the Jones House on the hill and retired from the La Retama Library in the old City Hall building on Mesquite Street.

Their background gave them some preparation. My mother and aunt often talked about the little library in Electra, the small North Texas town where they grew up. They'd spent much time there, were familiar with its operation, and long kept contact with the librarian, Miss Myrtle Russell.

My mother's penchants for reading and crafts were deepened when at age eight she caught polio. In 1926 it could neither be prevented nor effectively treated. She was expected to remain bedridden, reading and practicing the elaborate embroidery she learned, but she also had a determination to walk again. She spent a couple of years in leg braces and by sheer will power forced herself to walk without them.

As a result of her reading and home schooling she skipped the grades she missed and then some, graduating at age fifteen in 1934. According to the Electra newspaper for that 23 March she was named "the most brilliant and outstanding student of the senior class" by the

American Technical Society. Her habit of wide reading continued to give her advantages though neither she nor her sister could ever afford more than a few college courses.

But she was still disabled. Boys had to carry her up the steps at Electra High School and she had elsewhere to rely on elevators. She became able to walk a great deal but always limped and could never move fast. She was always in danger of falling and could never drive a car.

My maternal grandfather lost his job and house to the Great Depression. Till he came to work on the seawall his job searches brought no lasting results. After helping build what later became Padre Island Drive and NAS he worked at the latter till he retired. Summers his son, future Del Mar College President Jean Richardson, who'd stayed behind to graduate from Electra High School, worked here.

When my father and uncles enlisted for World War II my mother and aunt, having spent some time here, brought the kids to an apartment near their parents in La Armada. Everyone returned from overseas and decided to stay in the city that had rescued them from the Great Depression and enjoyed milder winters than the Red River Valley.

The sisters' first contact with the local library was during the War. They likely went downtown to the Jones House, but they did tell me they checked out books from the Bookmobile, which regularly stopped at La Armada. The driver, the Mrs. Hardy who later became Library Director, would park in the shade of some trees, open the side of the van, and unfold a card table for a desk. She once made the peculiar comment that there were few customers when it rained.

At the time the Public Library had competition. Sometimes the two of them rented books from McInnis Bookstore at Six Points for ten cents a day. Often they walked there, resting at Brooks Drugstore at Ayers and Date near the Del Mar campus. After shopping they would take another break at Borden's Ice Cream Shop or the drugstore at 1801 Alameda at Palermo. Half a century later my aunt, after noting that McInnis' wife was the sister of the owner of Gage Hardware at Six Points, said they disliked the bookstore. Mr. McInnis "followed us around suspiciously" apparently thinking they shoplifted.

There were other drawbacks. Much of the town was recently developed or rural. From a dentists' office above the Six Points drugstore the view down South Staples Street extended to where it disappeared into the brush as Dump Road. The bus station, across from Limerick's at 1701 S. Staples, was "an island in a sea of mud" according to my aunt.

Because of all the servicemen and the riffraff they attracted, my grandfather didn't like the sisters even taking the bus to Six Points, much less downtown. He would insist they wait till he got off work so he could take them. I'd guess these were the conditions that helped the Library to grow and motivated it to start the Bookmobile service.

It was several years later that my mother and aunt started at the Library. By then we had a house. Like his father-in-law, my uncle, E. L. Walker, started a NAS career and my aunt had found an unsatisfying slot at Lichtenstein's Department Store. My father was reactivated for the Korean War --- from which he also returned --- and not only did we lose his income but the paperwork for his allotment was lost for six months in some bureaucratic snarl.

My mother took in sewing and her mother helped by clerking at the Jitney Jungle grocery store on Ayers. There still wasn't enough money so my mother applied for a job at J. C. Penny's toy department. She wasn't able to keep up the necessary pace because of her lameness and after one day was told she "wouldn't do."

A lady for whom she'd done some sewing suggested she apply at the Library. She told me who this was, but I no longer remember the name; it could well have been Mrs. Hardy, by then Library Director.

On 22 March 1951 she began what she expected to be a temporary job working part time on the evening shift for \$ 150 per month. After a short while she was working full time. "That's one time" she wrote me years later "when what I could do counted for more than how I walked."

One day not too long after starting my mother heard of another opening and immediately phoned my aunt at work. She came and applied during her lunch hour and was accepted. Her boss at Lichtenstein's, she told me, was furious because she left for only \$ 15 more a month.

The Library jobs enabled them to take some courses at Del Mar as well as meet financial needs. My aunt was soon able to leave La Armada for a house and my mother probably felt she'd have a hard time finding another job. That's how their Library careers began.

At that time the Library was in the Jones House. Around 1900 the Joneses were wealthy. The house I remember was on the bluff and faced the bay, large, wrapped with wide porches, and rising two, maybe three stories to an attic. Where the front walk met South Upper

Broadway Street was a stepping stone, an aid to access to high wheeled carriages. It was a rectangular concrete block and inscribed with the family name. In the back was a smaller house, former servants' quarters, and a driveway of shell or gravel --- I forget which. The yard was big, the lawn sporting big wonderful shade trees, and behind and against the house were flowers and bushes and viney trellises.

Though I must have seen it often I recall the interior less clearly. However, my memories apparently are accurate since they match those of Treasure Nelson, whose family often used the library and whom I met thirty-five years later when she worked at Half Price Books, then on Weber Road. I remember smells of books, of must, of old wood suffusing the rooms, and that the floorboards of the hard used and poorly maintained house squeaked underfoot. There was no air conditioning though there were fireplaces, the screened windows and doors being opened and closed according to the weather.

Persons entering the front door faced the polished brown Circulation Desk, more of a counter, and the staircase to their right. I don't know if there was a door behind the desk, but the foyer opened on either side into large rooms connected to other rooms. The one to the right was the Research Room, filled with big oak tables and books that couldn't be checked out. Former livingrooms, parlors, diningrooms were places for reading and study.

Children's books, I think, were on the second floor where bedrooms, playrooms, and nurseries were all turned to literary use. Upstairs and down, rooms were filled with shelves and shelves of books, wooden shelves mostly, spaced by tables and chairs. The walls everywhere were mounted with panels of cork to muffle sound.

The kitchen was used for processing and storage and as employees' lounge. I must a number of times have run in and out the back door, but except for one thing I remember little about it. This was the dumb waiter, a pulley operated elevator that cooks once used to send food and refreshments upstairs and bring down dirty dishes. I enjoyed opening its sliding wooden door and sending it up and down the dark musty smelling shaft.

Such odds and ends are the bulk of what I recall. Summer evenings the windows were usually open to the Gulf breeze, letting in the soothing sounds of rustling leaves, crickets, and lagging traffic that contrasted with day's birds and cicadas, busses and streaming cars. Sometimes we ran and played on the porch, likely to the annoyance of patrons. They would soon enough be roused as nine o'clock approached because male employees --- usually teenaged boys --- threaded through the shelves announcing like town criers, "Library's closing, fifteen minutes;" "Library's closing, ten minutes;" "Library's closing, five minutes."

On at least one July Fourth or Buccaneer Days we watched through windows of victorian dormers then from the roof as fireworks burst over the inky bay. That means I must've seen the Jones House attic, even though I don't recall it. My aunt told me it was crammed with books of all kinds. What interesting and valuable items were lost that once were there?

We saw those particular details because my mother had to be driven to work and picked up, and that frequently involved taking the kids along. During adults' daytime errands we might be left to watch movies at the Ayers or Tower theaters or dropped off to play in South Bluff Park. At that time this was quite safe, but some days we were left to play in the Jones yard.

The janitor who lived in the old servants' house was a small aged appearing man called Shorty whose real name was Eulalio Rios. He had a wonderful big brown dog, short haired, dock tailed, called Cappy, short for *El Capitán*. Cappy was friendly, patient, calm, and protective toward children. He would stretch out in some comfortable place where he could watch over us.

Perhaps like the Jones children, we chased bugs and lizards through bushes and in scraps of building materials. We found the fragile skeleton of a skink that had died there. Sometimes we made up story games from comics and radio programs. My cousin Vicki and I discovered that dry elm and cottonwood leaves made a crumbling

sound and used them to that effect when holding someone's hand. It's natural I would have these direct memories of the Jones House.

However, I do know some details of operations there. Books had a manila pocket or diagonal strip pasted inside the front cover that held a book card and a date due card. In some the date due card was a paper slip glued in by its top edge. When someone checked out a book both cards were stamped with the due date, originally with a rubber stamp and ink pad. Date due cards remained with the book and book cards were kept at the Library, but I don't know how these were organized to keep track of overdues. Books were checked out for two weeks and could be renewed for, I think, another two when returned on the due date. I don't know what was done about overdue books, but I suppose a fee was charged.

In the early 1950s the Library got a date stamping machine that was similar to a time clock. It was gray or brown, roughly rectangular, and sat on the Circulation Desk; it had a slot with a flat projecting sleeve to guide cards slipped in for stamping. All books got removable date cards, and because cards were inserted in the machine half their length they were divided into four sections, two per side, separated by small print and sometimes numbered.

Books' dewey catalog numbers were on the spines, cards, and pockets. On the spine the number was usually in white ink or paint, but sometimes black on white tape or paint. Some few books had heavy tape down the spine bearing the numbers. Dust jackets, where present, were placed in clear plastic sleeves that were usually stuck to the cover with transparent tape and had the numbers on a paper slip at the sleeve spine.

On back of the title page the catalog number and library name were written in pencil. Along the gutter of the facing page, also in pencil, were, bottom to top, the month and year acquired, the source, the book's cost, and a number I can't now identify. Originally this page, page 51, and perhaps certain other pages were embossed with the Library's seal. By the mid 1960s if not before the library name and another number were stamped there in ink instead. The author's dates, in parentheses, were penciled under the title page by-line along with his or her real name if a pseudonym were used.

The card catalog was a set of wooden cabinets containing rows of small drawers. These slid in and out almost noiselessly and held three inch by five inch cards that were held in by a rod passing through a hole near a card's lower edge. This brass rod was secured to the back of the drawer and by a knob screwed onto it through the drawer front. One cabinet listed books by title, one by author, and one by catalog number --- that is, by subject. Every book had a card in each file

holding the same information in different order, which were typed up in the Catalog Department along with the book and date cards.

Each section's cards were in alphabetical or numerical order with heading cards for important topics and authors, and number changes. Once a book's number was found it was necessary to look on the shelf or ask at the desk to know whether or not it were checked out. The shelves, "the stacks" they were called, had labels on the ends giving the range of numbers and the topics. Shelves had labels on their edges, as well. I don't know where in the Jones House the card catalog was located or exactly how the stacks were laid out.

When books wore out some repairs were done at the Library. Torn pages might be taped, spines mended with heavy tape usually matched to some degree with binding color, torn books might be glued together. Some rebinding was done at the Library but badly damaged books were sent to binderies or replaced as soon as possible. Professionally rebound books usually looked quite different from originals, having thicker covers with more solid colors and sometimes attractive abstract designs and patterns. Discarded books had "WW" for "worn out/withdrawn" written inside the covers and usually the pockets were torn out. These were thrown in the trash or donated to charities or taken by employees.

With few differences operations continued thus into the 1970s.

It's important to know the buildings and procedures but these exist to serve people; particular persons at particular times *are* a library. Regular operations involve two groups: patrons and staff. I was too young and infrequently at the Jones House to remember much about either, though I do remember employees who were there and at La Retama. I have often heard my mother and aunt talk about them and since there were likely fewer people involved than later they probably knew them better.

Some patrons doubtless only read at the Library but most probably checked books out. A local address was usually but not always required to get a library card. My aunt told me that "the tourists who stayed in the area in front of the old Courthouse and came back every year could put up a deposit for library cards." This deposit was \$ 2.00 and they could check out up to four books at a time; locals, I think, could take out six or eight.

As I recall, children and adults had different appearing cards. I remember having one of yellow construction paper and another time a red one that had an inch long number embossed piece of metal

crimped into it. I don't remember much about library cards because staff and their families didn't actually need them.

Besides keeping them too long, patrons stole, lost, and defaced books. I don't know what was done in such cases, but I don't see how anyone who checked a book out could get away with it.

Patrons regularly defaced books. Any revealing illustrations were vulnerable, but depictions of Classical Age statues and Renaissance nude paintings were particularly targeted. Even pictures lacking sexual import were defaced. When I was about ten I found peculiar decorations added to a book on prehistoric animals: dimetrodons, stegosaurus, titanotheres all had cigars and cigarettes drawn in their mouths with smoke spiraling up the pages from them.

Words were also defaced, especially back when even "breast" and "thigh" were considered racy. Parts of words like "titan" and "woodpecker" would be crossed out. When explicit words and phrases did appear they might be circled or underlined, copied in the margin, or even listed inside the covers with the numbers of the pages on which they appeared. Because of this nonsense as well as prevailing standards books likely to be vandalized were kept in "closed" or "reserved" stacks and had to be asked for.

Among the patrons I heard of was a fellow the staff called Stinky. It wasn't that he had poor personal hygiene but rather that he wore an especially pungent hair tonic. In the old house he liked to sit in front of an open window and the Gulf breeze would carry the smell throughout the musty rooms. Another, whose nickname I don't know, scared the young female staff because he watched them while pretending to read.

A seemingly well liked if eccentric person known in the Jones House and La Retama was an elderly man named Mr. Pritchitt --- I hope I've spelled his name correctly. A scholarly man of predictable habits whose address nobody seems to have known, he was a shirt salesman who carried his sample case with him and sometimes tried selling to other patrons. At the old house he used to wash his socks in the upstairs restroom, carry them downstairs wearing his shoes on bare feet, and hang them to dry over the fireplace mantle. Finally Mrs. Hardy asked him not to do that and as far as I know he complied.

He was best known for constantly talking to himself, muttering even as he walked about downtown. A couple of times boys who worked at the Library hid behind some shelves and moved books as he passed by, which he apparently took as replies to his monologue. The consensus of staff opinion was that his mind had been unhinged by his project of translating the works of Louisa May Alcott into French.

Indeed, his conversations may even have been with Alcott. My aunt once heard him asking as he pored over *Jo's Boys*, "Whose boy was he, Louisa? Whose boy was he?"

That I know of I saw him once, during the Buccaneer Days fireworks display about 1959 or 1960. My mother and aunt were on the evening shift (their schedules changed several times) so it was just after nine o'clock. As we drove carefully among the cars around the curve of Ocean Drive near Craig Street my mother exclaimed in horror that there was Mr. Pritchitt. I saw, briefly, a nicely dressed elderly man, short and somewhat frail looking, holding binoculars that were on a neck strap. He had an expression of childlike enjoyment, seemingly oblivious to the haphazard traffic through which he was walking.

Segregation, in effect when the Library was in the mansion, caused some problems. State law required separate restrooms and drinking fountains for black and white. Hispanics usually used white facilities. The Jones House had two functioning restrooms, the one under the stairs being for staff only. Men and women, also, had to use both. I suppose a person asked for the key and locked the door from the inside. The staff worried more about not separating the races than not separating the sexes. A staunch segregationist could have caused the City deep legal trouble over this but as far as I know none ever did.

Quite likely many black people avoided the Library for that reason. A black man named Bosse or Boze was one of the few my aunt

remembered spending enough time there to use the restroom. He was doing genealogy research. Another black patron, unless I've heard different accounts of the same person, had a masters degree and worked as an elevator operator at Lichtenstein's. My mother told me he was writing a history of black people in Corpus Christi, a project likely continued at La Retama. The Jones House staff were astonished, few of them having even thought of such a thing as black history.

The mother of local politico Joe McComb often used the Library and brought him with her. Young Master McComb, according to my aunt, "whined all the time."

The only other Jones House patron I recall hearing about is Edna Ferber. Supposedly here to do research for her novel *Giant*, she made but a superficial examination of the historical materials. Actually she just wanted to pick up "atmosphere" or "authenticity" and had little interest in past or present reality. The staff found her rude and superficial and detested her.

Shorty was a small wiry man with sunken eyes and few if any teeth whom I doubt was as old as his hard life had made him appear. The Library job was probably the best he'd had, but he continued buying dog food for his family as well as Cappy, who died before the

Library moved. I don't recall his wife, who was sick with cancer for a long time and insisted on consulting *curanderos* rather than modern doctors. I think she died soon after the Library moved. Shorty had at least a daughter, whom I don't recall, either.

Despite his life of drudgery, hardship, and illness Shorty was a decent, good natured man who liked people, especially children. He combined a capacity for empathy with a positive yet realistic outlook. He had a quirky sense of humor. Once about 1963 as I got off the La Retama elevator he asked if I'd heard the terrible explosion down the street. When I said I hadn't he insisted it had been very loud and had just happened. After I still denied hearing it he stated that that was because there hadn't been an explosion.

My brother, a few years older than I, often went fishing with him on the bayfront. Our mother was concerned he might pick up some unsavory expletives but he assured her Shorty swore only in Spanish. Even so I doubt he used very potent terminology. The only time I ever heard Shorty tell even a mildly risqué joke was when I was in my mid teens and it was informally appropriate. Shorty and my brother were friends for a long time. When in 1959 he graduated Shorty sent him a card that on the outside read "All things come to him who waits" and on the inside "If he works like hell while he waits."

My aunt remembered a Gertrude Thatcher who worked at the Jones House and quit when she became pregnant at age forty. I don't remember her.

Virginia Mote, my aunt told me, started at the Jones House when she was seventeen and in high school. When she got married, after how long I don't know, she quit and worked a while at an electric company. In the 1970s she divorced and returned to the Library. I can't place her, either, but I often heard her name and must have seen her.

My aunt related a cute incident, though I don't know whether it tells more about Ms Mote or the temper of the times. The Library acquired a novel called *Spice Island Girl* that had scented pages and a picture of a topless girl on the cover --- clearly no literary masterpiece. Mote got paper and scissors and cut out a brassiere for the girl and carefully pasted it in place.

Catherine Boldgett was Local History Librarian until she retired in the 1960s. My mother seems to have regarded her well and mentioned her often. I must have seen and spoken to her myself but do not remember her at all. I think it was in early 2002 that I happened upon Blodgett's obituary in the paper and saw that she'd reached her nineties, outliving many coworkers. That's all I know about her.

Nancy Rayburn was very outgoing, always cheerful, and clearly an excellent worker. She was short and plump in a pleasantly maternal fashion and had short brown hair. She came from Iowa, her mother died when she was a child, and she never learned to drive despite having no disabilities. She was married to a man I met once and recall as very tough and rugged looking. They had three kids, somewhat younger than I, whom I always picture as slender blond waiflike children though I saw them numerous times as they grew up. I don't know what her original position at the Library was.

Norma Goering, nee Hess, was Mrs. Hardy's secretary. Small, with a squarish face and deepset eyes, she was very pleasant and often spoke as though to children from working in the Children's Room. Because of her name she was harassed during World War II and investigated by the FBI. She had lived on the east coast and mentioned seeing Frank Sinatra on the subway; she wanted a rose he was holding but I don't know whether she got it. She married a man from Yorktown and they settled here. When she worked for the Library she exercised at Sokol Hall and when she retired --- I suppose in the 1970s --- she bought a house on Lake Mathis.

Again, though I have to have seen her, I don't remember Mrs. Hardy at all. She married at age fifty, so I don't actually know whether Hardy is her married name. My mother once mentioned that she was diabetic. Though from Texas, she had studied (a statement I take to

mean attended college) in New York City. During the early 1940s she was driving the Bookmobile. She was succeeded at this, whether immediately or not I don't know, by Nina Duque, whom I remember as a large woman who held the position for a long time. I don't know the path by which Mrs. Hardy became Library Director.

Mrs. Hardy's attitude wasn't typical of the time or of bureaucrats. She didn't believe in censoring children's reading, which she felt should be left up to the parents. She insisted that nobody should come to work when they were feeling bad and that women should take at least one day off during their periods. She would back up an employee when most government workers should but wouldn't.

My aunt usually dealt with the public. Rabbi Wolf's son Philip worked at the Jones House and once when she was too busy to answer the phone she told him to. She overheard him say, "You don't even know that?" Privately she told him not to talk that way to patrons. He didn't appreciate it and told his father. The rabbi complained to Mrs. Hardy, who informed him that my aunt was right.

By the time my mother and aunt were there the Jones House was in poor condition. Designed as a private home and not a public building, it was close to a century old. Among other things it leaked badly and one evening so much rainwater poured in that it was standing on the first floor, at least in the foyer area. With the help of a boy named Harry Lockerby my mother located a brace and bit and drilled a series of holes in the floor behind the Circulation Desk. The first floor was drained at the cost of further damage.

The City decided to move the Library into the former City Hall on Mesquite Street, where it would be called La Retama Public Library. Newer and, I think, originally an office building that was modernized for City offices, it was brick and concrete with plate glass windows, three floors and a mezzanine, and air conditioning. Mrs. Hardy was in charge of the transition.

Inevitably she had to deal with segregation. An architect named Levy was hired to fit the building to legal specifications. He designed an elaborate set of eight public restrooms, four on each open floor plus two for staff and two drinking fountains. Except for the soon to be laughable assumption that there would be no black librarians the plan was the object of ridicule. It was so complicated and expensive that it was rejected, and I don't know how the problem was to be handled. I

recall no segregated facilities at La Retama and in any event segregation was soon overthrown.

After planning and struggling with such problems Mrs. Hardy resigned, according to my aunt "because she felt she wasn't up to such a big job" as being La Retama Director. This was in 1953 and the move wasn't completed till 1955.

She was replaced by Phyllis Burson, whom I came to know very well. Phyllis was tall and had a natural almost imperious manner of being in charge. At thirty-nine she had a shock of graying hair and then fashionable plastic framed glasses that added to this impression.

Just before this Phyllis was Assistant Librarian at Del Mar College. She had a law degree and came from Seattle, where her ex-husband, also a lawyer, lived. She had worked in Montana and perhaps elsewhere in the northwest. She lived on Melbourne street with her parents, the Sheidlers, and two daughters, Theo Lynn and Marilyn Kay (whom everyone called Mary Kay). The girls would visit their father in Seattle and the family attended nearby All Saints Episcopal Church on South Staples. At some point in time Phyllis damaged her hip or leg in an accident and was also left with a limp. This injury caused her considerable trouble.

An immediate if unplanned difference Phyllis made was that Norma didn't want to work directly with her, for what reasons I don't know. Norma stayed on many more years in Cataloging and the Chil-

dren's Room. Nancy Rayburn took her place as Director's Assistant (not merely secretary) and was the right person for the job. Soon she was running petty errands and doing Phyllis' hair, but she did far more important work as well.

I don't know how closely Phyllis followed Mrs. Hardy's plans or what changes might have had to be made. I wonder now, knowing how she got things done while being a total screwball, if the debates and delays over segregation matters were Phyllis' noncommittal way of dealing with that volatile but passing issue. I don't remember the actual move, which I suppose took about a week. For some time afterward when staff referred to the Jones House they called it "the Library on the hill" since it was uptown from La Retama.

A few items I know of made the move. My mother took a wreath woven of hair, likely once meaningful to the Joneses, to La Retama. I don't know what became of it. She had convinced Mrs. Hardy to clean up a cabinet from the attic and set it beside the front door to hold new fiction. It had various uses at La Retama and ended up in a meeting room at the Comanche Street building. There was a mechanical adding machine (as they were then called) that I played with as a small child. La Retama used it till around 1970.

The Jones House was torn down and its site became a parkinglot for the First Presbyterian Church. In 1986 I watched the Sesquicentennial fireworks from there.

Unlike the Jones House I remember La Retama well, down to its smell of books, stucco and wood, and air conditioning. A row of four or six glass doors faced Mesquite Street in the building's northeast corner. On the wall to the right of someone entering were pay phones. A step up from this foyer was a large high ceilinged room. The blond wood Circulation Desk, again actually a counter, marked off an area along the north wall and backed into some offices. In these books returned were sorted, cards were kept up with, and personnel took breaks. The first floor's north wall was partly glass shaded by bamboo curtains. The counter's long side faced the main room, its short side, with book return slots, the entrance. It had two waist high swinging doors, one facing the Library entrance, one the stairs.

The main room had a large open area. A mezzanine covered about a third of this room and the back of the first floor that was the Reference Department. This was called "the balcony" and was on a second floor level, reached by the stairs and the elevator. The balcony held nonfiction and had belt level railings --- regularly spaced metal bars topped by a blond wood handrail --- and one could look down

from it on both the main room and Reference. I never heard of anyone jumping or falling from it. Under the balcony were fiction stacks, divided from the open area by a waist high partition that was also a bookshelf and a brick planter beside the doors.

In front of the fiction stacks was the current magazine and newspaper reading area. Large windows in the east and one section in the south walls could make the space uncomfortably hot in the morning sun, sometimes despite the bamboo curtains that also screened pedestrians and the bus stop just outside. An aisle ran along the windowless bulk of the south wall, past the caged part of the Reference Room, and opened near the balcony's back staircase and the back doors.

One back door led directly outside and was always locked to prevent theft, but the fire escape door was always openable from the inside. The fire escape was a rectangular concrete shaft on the back of the building. It had a fire door and a landing on each floor and the roof and steps turning down to the ground floor. The doors could be opened only from inside the Library and so had to be propped if one didn't want to go outside. The shaft smelled of stale air and rough concrete.

The Reference Department had two sections. From the elevator shaft almost to the back wall were shelves enclosed in a cage of stout black wire. The Reference Librarian, often my aunt, sat with her back to this, facing the picture windows on the north wall. The only en-

trance to the closed stacks was a waist level swinging door between her desk and a heavy wooden file cabinet. This section was for the material that had to be asked for: valuable items, art and photography books, some medical and scientific works, and other items that through the 1960s couldn't circulate. Among these were Henry Miller's scribbles, Joyce's *Ulysses*, even Lawrence's trite *Lady Chatterly's Lover* as well as Nabokov's *Lolita*. Despite precautions, books were defaced and stolen.

The other section was the reading room between the closed stacks and the windows. There were shelves along and perpendicular to the back wall that held bound periodicals and general reference works. Desks divided down the middle by small shelves holding encyclopedias and such books as *Who's Who* occupied part of the room.

In the middle of the Library was an elevator and a staircase that wrapped around the elevator shaft. The front balcony stairs were open and like the elevator door faced north (in their case, on the ground floor). The stairs, however, faced the swinging door to the Circulation Desk.

In front of the elevator's ground floor door was an atrium like area, open to the main room. A wood framed glass wall partly separated it from the Reference Room; right next to the elevator a regular sized doorway and a step up led there. In this atrium was the card

catalog, in cabinets probably from the Jones House, against the short wall of the Circulation Office, and back to back mid room.

At the top of the balcony stairs was an awkwardly situated pillar bearing a drinking fountain that was crowded by the end of a shelf. Behind the elevator on the balcony was a reading area, partly above the closed stacks. The stairs continued to one's right into the wall behind the elevator shaft, making one turn as it went up and emerging on the next floor facing north like the elevator to its right.

Here on what was called the second floor but which was on a third floor level there was another small square area directly above the balcony landing and the card catalog. Immediately on the elevator's other side the stairs continued up into the wall and around the shaft to what was called the third floor. Though largely unused when I was involved with La Retama it could be entered by the stairs or the elevator. There was a chain or rope with a "Do Not Enter" sign hanging from it stretched across the stairwell entrance.

On the right side of the atrium was the Children's Room, which was fairly large and above the front entrance. There was some space behind the wall facing the elevator that I think was included, but I'm no longer sure. As far as I know this remained the Children's Room till La Retama closed. At different times my mother, my aunt, Norma, and persons I can't place were in charge there.

The Catalog Department, where books were cataloged and processed, was in a similar sized room above the current periodicals reading area. This was originally intended to be an art and music room but the plan was canceled, likely because bureaucratic and financial hassles prevented repairs to the third floor. There was a listening booth or two in its west wall under the stairwell, locked and used to store valuable items. (What these were I don't know.) Another west wall door opened into a conference room.

As I remember it about half the Catalog Room was taken up with shelves of books and equipment. Next to windows overlooking mesquite Street and the bus stop were a couple of rows of desks. At these the nearly always entirely female crew ordered, received, cataloged, and made cards for books. Here my mother, aunt, Norma, and several other persons I do remember worked at various times.

About 1970 this room was converted to fiction stacks. I was there a couple of times in the mid 1970s. Having by then no automatic behind the scenes *entree* I don't know where the cataloging was done.

In the opposite side of the second floor atrium was a double door to a hall that ran north-south. Across it from this door were double swinging doors to what had been the municipal fire alarm and traffic signal control center. Much wiring and machinery remained, enclosed in a square structure taking up considerable space from the back wall out. A counter, further narrowing the front of the room, stood be-

fore it. One area to the left of someone facing this extended back to the fire escape.

Here some book repairs and processing were done, displays made, and some materials stored. In an adjoining room overlooking Peoples Street were the genealogy and local history stacks. In fact, this whole area above the Reference Room was the Local History Room.

At the hall's north end were the offices of the Director and her assistant. Phyllis' office had a window on Peoples Street and Nancy's office was to the left of someone facing Phyllis' door.

At this hall's south end was a shorter hallway running east-west. The latter's west end had a small room that as far as I know was only ever used to store donated books that hadn't been sorted and other odds and ends. The restrooms were in this hall's south wall. A door in its east end opened into the committee or meeting room.

This room, the one with a door into the Catalog Room, was above the balcony reading space and against the Schatzel Street wall. It was probably where the Mayor and City Council held conferences and it had a similar Library function. It was also often piled with unsorted donations. No doubt its uses changed over the years. It had a large oblong table with comfortable chairs, likely moved to the Comanche Street Library.

The stairs and elevator admitted one to what was called the third floor. Little use was made of it during this time and it looked as though

City Hall hadn't used it, either. It was an open, unfinished, dusty smelling room that was lighted by windows giving an excellent view of downtown. Some debris, boxes, things left over from various projects, and a few oddities nobody could account for were piled against walls and pillars. Of these last objects I kept a teakwood elephant; its ears were broken off and its tusks, probably of ivory, were also missing, and incised into the bottom of its stand were traces of some south Asian writing.

The roof, reached, as I recall, via the fire escape, was covered with pebble spread tar. It was enclosed by a chest high concrete wall and was most of the time uncomfortably hot.

There was probably a basement or cellar of some type for utility and elevator repairs, but I don't remember ever seeing it.

I have La Retama's neighborhood more clearly in mind than that of the Jones House. Just outside the back door was a covered parking space for the Bookmobile, a roof supported on metal poles. At the corner of this driveway and Peoples Street was an after hours book depository, a metal box resembling a mailbox with a slotted extension to reach car windows. Maybe twice a day someone trundled out a wooden book cart to empty it. Directly behind the Library was the

downtown opening of the Tunnel. I remember using it when very small, but it was closed in the 1950s.

Across from the Tunnel ramp, at 517 Peoples Street, was a novelty store frequented by staff, who called it the Joke Shop. Many items sold there were quite raunchy for the time. Nearby was a hamburger stand, I think in a wide alley next to the Joke Shop and slightly uphill. Directly across Peoples from the Library entrance on the corner with Mesquite, at 601, was a coin and jewelry store, its entrance faced with butterscotch colored tile.

Toward the port on the same side of Mesquite was a diner owned by a Greek named Stacey Cassimus, an office supply store, and a women's clothing store. Despite the diner, Library staff liked to eat at the Nixon Café on the hill in the Wilson Building. I don't remember what was directly across Mesquite from the Library, but a block south was the Golden Banner print shop; I remember it only because in 1964 I dated a girl named Joleen Powell who worked there.

In the next block, toward the bay, on the Library side of Peoples was Al's Newsstand, visited fairly often by staff members. Al's later became A&P Newsstand and relocated to Six Points. Near Al's was Diamond's, another coin and pawn shop. I don't recall what was across Schatzel Street from the Library or when the bank was built there.

There were gradually operations updates. In 1961 the Library got a checkout system that was set into the Circulation desk. Book cards were inserted into a slot for date stamping then put with the patron's library card into a small stainless steel frame beside a glass square flush with the countertop. The checker then pushed a button that caused a soft plastic block to press them briefly on the glass as a flash of light copied the information on a strip of translucent paper moving between two reels. This, staff called "toilet paper." I don't know how they used this to keep track of books, either. Employees could write their names on a slip of paper to check out books in lieu of a library card.

One time I typed some book cards with joke titles and fake information, handed them to the checker with cards from several books I had, and she copied them all on the tape and gave them to me to replace in the books. I never got any overdue notices on the fake titles.

Public relations rather than modernization in itself was a major interest of Phyllis. She insisted on writing personalized letters to people who made donations, though I've been told her judgments on such matters "seemed a bit peculiar." She would give my mother, my aunt,

and Catherine Blodgett books to read and write reviews of and would send the reviews to the newspaper. I don't know whether it was Phyllis' idea, but the Local History Department regularly did research for City officials.

I don't otherwise know much about the Library's relationship with City government either under her administration or Mrs. Hardy's. I do know that Phyllis was extremely interested in such matters, as I'll relate. Despite this, I recall seeing that the situation couldn't always have been satisfactory even if I don't know specific issues.

One time as we passed down Peoples Street when my mother was either working evenings or leaving in the afternoon we saw a man in an expensive suit walking about before the front door as though impatiently awaiting a ride. She identified him as Mayor Smith, remarking that the staff referred to him as "Fiddlin' Farrell." An employee named Sharon Hopkins once repeated staff opinion that he or another mayor, I forget which, wouldn't do anything because he didn't realize or didn't care what shape the City was in.

More people used La Retama than the Jones House. The local population increased so rapidly when I was in elementary school that children had to attend classes in half day shifts, sometimes in temporary buildings --- the reason for new schools and one reason for a new library. Besides being bigger, La Retama had a public, professional appearance that the old mansion lacked. The Library was becoming comprehensive enough to serve the whole region, though I found the A&I Library in Kingsville better.

I heard bits and pieces about La Retama patrons. My aunt recalled Lee Gariotis, whose father owned the Nixon Café and who read everything he could find about Marilyn Monroe. He had a huge poster made of her and apparently came to the Library to keep up with everything written about her.

One day when she was on the Reference Desk a slight young man with a condescending manner came up and said with a sneer, "Excuse me, but I'm trying to find something I know you wouldn't have here, but I thought I'd check anyway. I'm trying to find a copy of the speech Spartackius made to his men before the battle. Of course you don't have it."

Likely he'd just seen the 1960 movie about Spartacus. When the speech was nowhere to be found, he said, "Well, I knew you wouldn't have it but I just thought I'd ask."

Another epic film started a more satisfying exchange. While my mother was in the Children's Room a black kid named Terry came in looking for a book about T. E. Lawrence. He was surprised when during their search she mentioned that unlike Peter O'Toole, who portrayed him in the movie, Lawrence was short and dark haired.

He proved to have a sharp, inquiring mind and for some time he would come to the Library to visit her. No doubt this was one of many cases where her wide and continuous reading was useful to her job and perhaps beneficial to others. I remember Terry because she mentioned him a couple of times and once I met him at the Library when he was a polite and soft spoke, husky youth of about sixteen. His visits tapered off in the mid 1960s, I think. He came by once around 1970 or so, she told me, still polite and soft spoken, sporting a then popular afro hair-style.

Some patrons weren't local. A Dutch man interested in Indians wrote in excellent English asking whether it was permitted to travel between states and to reservations. I don't know how he got La Re-

tama's address or why he directed his inquiries here. My mother answered his questions in a couple of letters, and while I don't remember his name I recall a photo he sent showing him as a bearded man in his thirties. He did get to tour Indian Country, but I don't recall that he came here.

A young fellow in Alwaye, Kerala in India named Rajan Fabian wrote asking for an introduction to a millionaire who would finance his education here in dentistry. I wrote him a few times but didn't know any millionaire philanthropists. Again, I've no idea how he heard of La Retama or got the address.

Many patrons were book donors. People cleaning house or moving or clearing out estates donated books. Institutions and persons associated with them, often church schools and Catholic priests, as well as businesses that for various reasons had reference or general reading matter would all give books.

There was no certainty what people would donate, though most gave best sellers from past years, classics they'd had to read or intended to read, textbooks, and the occasional oddity. Catholic clergy often donated highly interesting books, many in different languages. Albert Heine seems to have been a donor. My brother and I knew him

from the "Junior Museum" and from the Unitarian Church, where I also knew his daughter Marianne. My aunt told me that Dr. Bauman (or Bowman) of the Rockport Marine Center often "tried to give stuff to the Library" and would get mad when any of it was refused.

Other patrons caused problems. "Mexican juvenile delinquents" and other "dope fiends" smoked pot in the restroom. Sometimes the fragrant smoke penetrated the hall between the restrooms and the Director's office. Inevitably the rascals got away, maybe not least because in those days before the drug's semi-acceptable popularity people thought it made users violent. Phyllis wanted the police to make regular patrols there but they claimed they didn't have the time.

She may also have wanted them to discourage the homosexual activity that, totally illegal and openly despised at that time, went on there. Certainly the fellows who indulged in and wrote about their proclivities in the Library restrooms were among the dregs of 1950s gay society, little if any above their counterparts in the bus station. One time one of them propositioned a young staff member who returned to the restroom with several other employees. They stood glaring at the man till he fled. That's about all that could be done.

That's not the end of patron seediness. Several men were arrested for exposing themselves in the stacks, sitting in chairs, standing on the balcony, wherever. I recall my mother mentioning one by his now forgotten name, a young family man who except for his compulsion was likable and pleasant. On that occasion he'd just been arrested again and she felt sorry for him.

Now and then some otherwise inoffensive individual, always a wimpy looking fellow, would sneak up on a librarian, usually while she was seated, and pinch her behind. This most often happened in the Children's Room. I don't know if any of these perps were arrested. For a while --- at least my aunt said "they quit after a while" --- some guys would enter the women's restroom, lock themselves in a stall, and peer over the top into the next one when it was occupied. One time some peculiar or desperate person stole the sanitary napkin dispenser.

Actually, most of the riffraff were normal, so to speak: thieves, pickpockets, and purse snatchers. I don't know of anyone trying to hold up the Library, though robbers tried to hide there a couple of times. Of those who stole I've no idea how many were caught.

My aunt had an encounter with a snatch team. Someone came to the Reference Desk with a question that required her to get up and cross the room to one of the shelves. She returned to find her purse gone; when she was at a safe distance and not looking a second thief went through the swinging door, grabbed her purse, and quickly left.

The decoy was nowhere to be seen, either, and neither thief was caught. The purse was later found emptied of money in an alley by the Furman Building.

Besides City officials and patrons, book salesmen frequented the Library. My mother and aunt often dealt with them and usually enjoyed their visits. The only name I can come up with now is Victor Hotho, whom my mother seems to have liked. If I met it I don't remember it.

Much contact with book dealers and the like was by mail. The result was a number of sometimes amusing errors. There was a collection of these, but I don't know what became of it and only remember two items.

This was before faxes and computers and some of the machines that collected and printed addresses for sale to merchants couldn't handle a name as long as "La Retama Public Library." It was now and then reduced to "La Retama Pub" and the Library regularly received catalogs of bar supplies thus addressed.

The other seems almost like someone's deliberate joke. Henry Miller's *Tropic of Cancer* arrived with a memo inside the front cover that said "If this book is not in this box please notify us."

Shorty and a man named Tony Perez were the janitors. I don't know if Tony was ever at the Jones House or how long he was at La Retama. He was an average sized man of about forty (speaking of 1960 to 1965), more Indian than Spanish. He seemed habitually surly, he spoke curtly in low tones if at all, avoided eye contact. Female employees were afraid of him. "Sometimes Tony looks at you like he could just cut your throat," I heard said.

I saw him differently. I never heard of him doing anything wrong. I'm sure he worked hard at his dead end job and he probably had things to worry about --- like how to pay his bills on his pathetic salary. Maybe he had misfortunes to deal with, but in any case he seemed a person happiest if left alone.

By contrast, Shorty talked more personally to long term employees he knew well, maybe in part because his wife had died. I heard only a bit about what he related. Shorty came from Laredo. As far as I know he didn't say much about his parents or other family, but spoke of years of hard agricultural labor. He lived outdoors much of that time and said he slept in ditches to avoid the winter wind, sometimes awak-

ening covered with ice caked weeds. When, how, why he settled in Corpus Christi and got to the Library I don't know.

Because of a couple of incidents I heard about I wonder if he really came from Nuevo Laredo. One time when he was young, maybe a small child, Pancho Villa rode into town amid a burst of gunfire and panicked citizens. A big, fat, unshaven man, Villa shot a couple of pedestrians and grabbed a fleeing woman whom he flung across his horse. "Shorty, he scared," Shorty said, "He run and hide. He not crazy." Another time he saw Villa shoot and bury some people in a grove of trees. He described the pistol shots as "Pop!"

Shorty devoted much time to helping people. He visited the sick and aged in hospitals, sometimes reading to them, sometimes just keeping them company. He brought reading matter and other items they needed, sometimes did small errands. He translated for people who didn't know English.

Since he retired around 1964 Shorty probably started at the Jones House about 1939 or 1940. He had an alcohol problem either acquired after retirement or well hidden till then. He was hospitalized a couple of times because of it and died about 1965. He was probably a couple of years past sixty but his difficult life had always made him appear older than he was.

Most staffers were female. I remember a few of them very well, some just barely, and I've certainly forgotten others. They came from different backgrounds and despite the increasing obsession with college degrees were at the time still hired because they were competent or young enough to learn good work habits.

At times my mother and aunt found their female coworkers amusing if not exasperating. One reason was that most of them were emotionally involved with television shows and the reported doings of movie stars. Another was their lack of general knowledge and critical judgment.

One time (years before 1969) my mother had occasion to mention the vast lunar lava plains called "seas." One astonished girl exclaimed, "You mean they've got seas up there?" When the autobiography of actor Errol Flynn, famous for his innumerable affairs, came out a couple of women said they felt sorry for his wife. They were shocked when my mother said she did not. Flynn's wives knew what he was like when they married him, she said, and they were the same sort anyway. When my brother caught a bat we decided to disprove the belief that bats became tangled in hair by putting it in our mother's

tresses; it looked about and took off. She mentioned this to the girls in Cataloging, one of whom said, "Oh, how could you *bear* it?"

That recorded, I'd like to note that the majority of the women were competent and hard working, and in my opinion far superior to people hired on paper qualifications alone.

Helen Halloran, if I have the name tied to the right mental image, was a tall, quite attractive woman who bore a look of perpetual skepticism. She had a daughter my age in my school, whom I didn't know well, a tall good looking girl with chestnut hair. Her name, I think, was Kathy, she got married and pregnant as a teenager, maybe she worked a while at the Library. That's all I know about the two.

Kathleen Cook, whom I remember as a small, pinched looking woman with longish brown hair and usually a weary expression, worked in Cataloging. Though burdened, I understood, with certain difficulties she would seem to have been an excellent employee and probably very cute when young. I don't know anything about her background, how long she was there, or what became of her. She and husband Jack had a daughter named Phyllis.

This Phyllis was a pale complexioned but well appointed wench who also attended South Park School. An individualist, first there to wear shag hair and a sack dress ("a bag in a sack" was the taunt), she was an overachiever. Assigned to memorize a poem in our ninth grade English class, she chose "Invictus" by William Earnest Henley. To

everyone's disgust she stood before the class and began to recite the textbook introduction to Henley till the teacher told her it wasn't necessary. Because of some redistricting issue, I think, she went to Ray High School instead of Carroll. She was at the Library now and then, I heard much about her, but we never dated.

For a while around 1961 a totally beautiful girl in her twenties, a slender ginger haired redhead, worked in Cataloging. Sonia Wakatake was married to a Japanese man from whom she was getting a divorce. They had children I never saw; once she had a heated phone exchange with him ending when she angrily agreed they could keep his name.

Sonia wasn't just beautiful, but smart, someone who enjoyed clever conversation and likely made an entertaining companion. After reading some theological item in a book she was cataloging she considered the word "theologue" and then asked me if someone who understood and studied his own delusions would be a "schizologue." She had lived in Japan and told entertaining anecdotes about the differences in cultures. She had an artistic flair, taking part in Little Theater productions, the mornings after which, my mother noted, she sometimes seemed hungover.

Besides being too old, she was too beautiful and poised for me to even think about, which was clearly true in her case of most grown men as well. Yet she was too honest and considerate even to a teenager, to even imply it. My mother found her interesting and seemed to

like her. Sonia wasn't there a long time and I don't know when she left.

Miriam (her last name escapes me) was a big boned, handsome woman in her thirties, quiet and always pleasant. I found her likable even though I didn't know her well, and so did my mother as I recall. She was in Cataloging around 1960 to 1965 or so, but I actually don't know when she started or left or much else about her.

For a while around that time a Molly, a large unattractive thirty-ish girl was in Cataloging. She sometimes ignored one if spoken to, perhaps why I remember her. She was involved on some level in politics and once remarked that a neighborhood was "a *nest* of Republicans." I think, and my aunt affirmed, that she wasn't well liked. That's all I know about her.

During the same period several girls named Judy worked at the Library. In Cataloging was a tall, very good looking, and astoundingly buxom redhead in her twenties. One time she piled a bunch of office materials on a stack of books and papers and started to carry them from one desk to another. Much of her load slid off and dropped to the floor, upon which she said, "Oh, hells bells!" That's all I know.

A teenager named Judy Schroeder worked in Cataloging and sometimes repaired books in the Local History area. She had light brown hair and large brown eyes and always dressed well. She was a very pleasant, likable person and we used to talk while she worked, but

we never dated. One time she asked me to go to a nearby music store and get her a record called "See the Funny Little Clown." She gave me the money but thought the title was "I'm a Funny Little Clown," with the result that I couldn't find it. I think she did get the record.

A Judy Borgsteadt, another teenager, started there a little while after that and did the same work, usually at a different time. She also dressed well and looked good, though she had a lame leg. I would also visit with her when she worked, but this Judy was a bit lippy and was dubbed a smart alec. She detested Judy Schroeder, whom she never lost an opportunity to criticize or complain about. That's all I know about these girls.

Finally, a blonde whom I usually saw on the Circulation Desk about 1965 may also have been a Judy. She was a statuesque gold tinged beauty blessed in the same way as the redheaded Judy if slightly less abundantly. She was about eighteen and went to Carroll High School, but I never knew her.

Some girls I did know from school worked there. In 1959 my brother started dating a girl from Carroll High named Sharon Hopkins. She was a couple of years older than I, lived in Shannon Estates, and worked at the Carroll library when I started there in 1960. She started

at La Retama around then, part time till she graduated. I went out a couple of times with her sister Lana, whom I'm pretty sure worked at neither library.

Sharon was a sweet, modest, hard working, if plain girl and my mother liked her. For some time when they both got off work at the same time we gave Sharon a ride home, even after she and my brother were no longer dating. (He was in the army by then, anyhow.)

An odd incident happened once when Sharon, a male employee whose name escapes me, and I got on the Library elevator. Sharon announced that this was her birthday so in the morning she would be a year older than today. I said she'd only be a day older than today but a year older than on her last birthday. She insisted that since it was her birthday and so she'd be a year older and I tried again to explain she'd be a day older, and then the fellow spoke up and said that Sharon was really stupid and couldn't understand such things. We were quiet, I was because I was surprised, and the doors opened on the second floor where we all got out.

Sharon married a fellow named Jim, who seemed extremely nervous at the wedding. Some time later I heard she was complaining about him, but that's what all women do so I didn't put much stock in it. She was at La Retama some years but after about 1965 I don't know anything about her.

I'd known Sharon Neff, who lived on Nesbitt Street, since maybe the seventh grade but for reasons I don't now know if I ever did we disliked each other. However, she knew Sharon Hopkins so before I could drive my brother gave her a lift sometimes when he gave me one. In high school this Sharon became involved with a boy named Diamond Jordan, a matter of some note that a friend named Fred Lerma pointed out to me a couple of times. Sharon and maybe Diamond worked at the Library around 1964 and I recall my mother mentioning that Sharon had made a big deal of naming Diamond her insurance beneficiary. That's all I know about the delightful young couple, neither of whom I saw or heard of after that.

Both my brother and I dated girls from the Library. Besides Phyllis Burson's daughters, in early 1969, right before entering the army, I met Grace Martinez, who was working there. She was about twenty years old, good looking with night black hair and olive skin, and lived with her family on Cloyde Street. We went out a few times and for a while exchanged letters.

Grace was smart, pragmatic, quietly tactful. She remarked, a bit puzzled, that someone had told her she was "astute," maybe puzzled because its Spanish cognate *astuta* can mean "cunning." One time we were in a gift shop when she suddenly gasped, a long breath intake, spellbound by a large round candle that was a personified solar face. I didn't buy it for her from lack of money. She once drove to Ft. Sam

Houston while I was there, a wholly innocent daytime date. When my ex-wife showed up at the Library Grace remarked to my mother, "I thought she would be taller." Grace was an interesting, complex person, though we didn't after all develop a lasting relationship. She was at the Library till sometime in the 1970s, remained friends with my mother and, I think, married and moved up east.

My brother met his first wife, Frances Garcia, while she was working at the Library. They were married at SS Cyril and Methodius Church in 1967, stayed together ten or twelve years, and had a son, Matthew, who became a City cop. I was largely out of town from early 1966 till early 1969 and in the army till 1971, so I didn't really get to know Frances till we were living in Dallas in 1972. She said she had worked at La Retama for some time in the 1960s. I simply did not remember her at all, but she said she remembered my being there many times. It leaves me to wonder what persons and events worth recording have totally slipped my memory; for the unknown omissions I should apologize!

My aunt's daughter Vicki, with whom we'd played at the Jones House, worked at La Retama while attending Del Mar College, and maybe during her senior year at Ray High School, around 1958 to

1960. Afterward she went to school one year in Denton then transferred to Austin. She got a masters in Library Science, married western historical writer C. F. Eckhardt, and had a daughter named Kristin. In the early 1970s Vicki worked at the Richardson, Texas Public Library until they moved to Seguin, where she worked at Texas Lutheran College Library.

Vicki's college roommate, Marjorie Walger, worked at La Retama when she did. My aunt described Marjorie's mother as a pretentious woman who worked downtown at Grant's, never learned to drive, ate bologna for lunch because she never learned to cook, and married someone with a Ph.D. Marjorie herself was a short, dark haired girl whom I thought closely resembled anthropologist Margaret Mead. As I recall, she herself was very concerned with what people would think of her. Right before starting at the Library she had surgery for gangrenous hemorrhoids, hardly the sort of thing for which one would like to be remembered after forty years.

No doubt Marjorie was an excellent employee, but I don't recall much about her from the Library. I did visit Vicki and her in Austin a couple of times. In the summer of 1961 I found Marjorie's books and records interesting. Even so, I still remember peculiar quirks. During one or another close call with war that summer she calmly remarked, "You're about that age." Then again, the three of us were walking along Guadalupe Street and saw a girl carrying the new Joan Baez LP.

"Look, she's got Joan Baez Number Two," said Marjorie, except that she pronounced the name as "Jo-ann Baze." She also collected smudge pots, the squat, round flares that were used to mark construction sites before electronic lights were cheap enough. I don't know what became of her.

There were a few peculiar incidents and individuals among female staff.

A girl in Cataloging whose name I don't have got a puppy, a chihuahua or toy poodle. The puppy was too young and too small to leave by itself so for a long time she would bring it to work in her purse and keep it on her desk in a coffee cup. I suppose this lasted only till the puppy could stay home alone. If I saw it I've forgotten the incident and only know about it because my aunt mentioned it years later.

If that was merely cute, my mother once came home laughing about something positively peculiar. That day as Norma was typing she began gobbling like a turkey. She repeated this several times as she typed, to everyone's utter puzzlement. Finally she got up and left for some reason or other and a couple of the women looked at her desk, discovering that she was cataloging a book called *Game Birds of Texas*.

A Shirley Brown or Jones, whom my mother said "has the mind of a five year old child" worked there, no doubt briefly. That's all I know about her.

For about three years in the late 1960s, my aunt told me, an Ann Watson worked at the Library. The only child of a rich Duval County couple, she married City Secretary Bill Reed after divorcing his nephew. She had three daughters from other marriages, two of whom ceased having anything to do with her because when her parents died "she used up their fortune in no time."

The Library's problem, though, was that she couldn't keep her hands off men. She groped male employees, who avoided her as much as possible, and patrons, who came in less and less. Finally, certain City employees from other departments who had to regularly use the Library complained to Phyllis. Watson had to resign.

In 1989 she was working at the same State agency as my ex-sister-in-law Frances, who'd known her at La Retama. According to Frances, Watson still behaved the same, and although in her fifties insisted she'd just had a miscarriage. I don't personally remember her and may never have seen her.

I recall fewer male than female employees, though I did know a couple of them very well. I can summon mental pictures of a few without knowing who they were and I've probably completely forgotten others. There were fewer male than female staffers and their ages and backgrounds were less varied. At the time most were local persons working full or part time while attending Del Mar College or Texas A&I or a trade school.

In the 1990s my aunt narrated a couple of items about two male employees Vicki knew, neither of whom I remember. Darren Rogers, later a teacher at Throckmorton, Texas, once walked home with her, that is, all the way from downtown to Aberdeen Street.

J. B. Cudd, whom Vicki knew in high school, was a "messenger for the Library," which I take to mean he ran errands and carried inter-departmental mail. He became a teacher and was fired, said my aunt, worked for a company making office supplies, and left that for another job. Even though she never reciprocated, he'd liked Vicki since high school and continued to show interest in her even after he married. For a long time he regularly drove by their house. Both of these guys would have been at the Library around 1960.

I do remember a Gary Passmore who went to Carroll when I did, but I didn't know more than who he was. Except that he was stocky, blond, wore a long coat in bad weather, was there around 1963 or 1964, and for some reason my mother didn't like him, I can't characterize him. I don't know what became of him.

My brother worked there briefly, I think, but exactly when and how long I don't know. One of his friends, Robert Travis "Curly" Evans, who lived in the 4700 block of Archer, was there around 1957 to 1960 or so before joining the navy. He was a big, shy, slow talking fellow with a fine sense of humor and brown curly hair. I recall many times he was at our house, his wedding to a Mormon girl, but nothing of his short career at La Retama.

Charles Irby worked there during the early 1960s. He was a round good natured fellow in his twenties who had a deep voice, black hair, and a heavy beard that showed by afternoon. Friendly, secure, with his own fine sense of humor, he would have been an asset any place he worked. That he was a Baptist and most of my family basically unreligious caused him no problem and brought no criticism on any level. Indeed, the only time I recall him expressing any negativity

was once at our house when he saw a cow tongue we were going to cook and found the thought of eating it repulsive.

It seemed a matter of course to find myself included in whatever so friendly and generous a person was doing. I was easily able to hitch a ride to Austin and back when Charles happened to be going there. I was able to go on a couple of Del Mar Geology Club field trips when he did, enabling me to go after he had graduated. He knew an amateur archaeologist named Stanton, who had excavated the at that time clearly visible Karankawa sites on Oso Creek.

(I wonder about the fate of other local archaeological sites, of which I knew several. One day Joleen Powell and I took a .22 rifle and hiked up a wooded creek bed off Ayers not far south of where SPID is now, where we spent the afternoon shooting cans and bottles and making out. We saw mammoth or mastodon ivory eroding out of the sides of the gully and trunks of trees a yard and more in diameter. There were sites off Ennis Joslin Road, as well.)

The last time I saw Charles Irby he gave me the opportunity to handle a valuable artifact. By 1966 we were both in Austin, where he worked at the UT Undergraduate Library. In, I think, 1967, I went by there to find him downstairs sorting photographs of the Boer War. He showed me some of Lewis Carroll's photos of little girls, then, reaching up on top of a metal bookstack retrieved a folded piece of card-

board. Inside was the original of the first photograph, a rough image of some buildings in 1826 France imprinted on a small sheet of metal.

John Kimmey was at La Retama when Charles Irby was. When I met him John was about eighteen or nineteen. He was six feet tall, slender, blond, and outgoing to a fault, with a loud insistent voice. Though intelligent and sensitive, at that stage his extroversion could override his sensitivity. John for a long time considered becoming an Episcopal priest. He liked Old English and Romantic poets (he developed a liking for World War I poet Rupert Brooke when I knew him), he liked classical and baroque music, especially organ music, knew Spanish fluently, and drank tea by the gallon.

John's family, who were well off and had property in Port Lavaca, lived on Delaine Street. Both parents were present, and a sister around my age named Jannelle. A much older sister named Jimmie was an Episcopal minister in New York. The family had connections in Morelia, Michoacan --- he gave me the mailing address of a Sra. Mercedes Sanudo for when he was there --- where they spent part of the summer and sometimes Christmas or Easter. On these trips they took kids whose parents could afford to send them, usually girls, to learn Spanish language and Mexican culture.

We shared some interests, if not some he may have at first thought. We looked over the Oso Creek sites and hiked up the new bridge to photograph the view. We emerged from the surf on the Island one time to find his car burglarized and his valuable watch gone. We experimented with spontaneous writing and produced reams of "sick" blank verse. When I was in Spohn Hospital with appendicitis in 1961 he brought a stack of magazines with copies of *Playboy* layered in. A few times I attended his church, the Church of the Good Shepherd on the hill, and my brother, Vicki, and I went to midnight mass with him a couple of Christmases. On one of these occasions, afterward at her house on Aberdeen, he attempted to demonstrate some maneuver with a broomstick --- passing it completely around the body without letting go of either end or some such --- and his accidentally comical rendition became a family story.

Much as we enjoyed the services, religion was a sore point. At that time, at least, John was prejudiced against black people; not unusual back then, non-theists took it as religion's moral failure. He was probably just as annoyed that I found such disputes as whether baptism should involve dunking or sprinkling ludicrous. He was even offended when I mentioned I'd dreamed he was a Baptist. In the heat of discussion he once told my mother she was "an ignorant heretic." She vehemently denied being ignorant. On John's notion of becoming

a priest, my brother laughed at the thought of contritely approaching him saying, "Father, I want to confess."

John's shallow boisterousness, his crass, usually calculatedly mean humor brought this on. He seemed oblivious as to when to quit and often vexed when he didn't hurt or bore people. He had a supply of trite comments that combined with little self-consciousness made him annoying to other staff. An example is that whenever a young female employee, usually by accident, showed any cleavage he remarked on her Seymour ("see more") blouse. That was rather mild. John insisted there was no such thing as a headache and when someone complained of one he continued his verbiage with the remark that "it's all in your head." At his house I found to his malicious glee that he had stolen from Reference a large brown two volume set, published around 1900, of meticulously copied pharaohnic art.

I understand John eventually got a headache and didn't think it was funny. To everyone's delight, I heard, he was finally embarrassed when someone gave him an especially raunchy Valentine card from the Joke Shop. Still, he never failed to leave people with a lasting positive impression.

In one respect that incidentally shows Corpus Christi still relatively small circa 1960 I was happy to abet his meanness. His sister Jannelle, about fourteen, and her friends, were snotty little rich girls, vicious as only teenaged girls are, and in their own estimation socially

far above me. I would be at John's house now and then and the girls relied on him for rides, so they couldn't always avoid me. To his malicious delight and my moral satisfaction I was able to make them utterly miserable with anatomical comments, suggestions we go out, and the like.

An example I related years later took place on a summer afternoon. For some reason John gave a ride to one of the girls, a smart, lively, very pretty girl named Ruthie Grossmann. In fact, I liked Ruthie. Being interested in organ music, John stopped by the Church of the Good Shepherd to see the organist, who was practicing. As we entered the front door I tugged her bra strap from behind and she exclaimed "Damn!" loudly enough to echo through the fortunately empty building. John was amused as Ruthie clapped her hand to her mouth.

Besides Ruthie (who insisted I was a *schlemiel*), I recall Cheryl Carter (who seemed afraid of me), and Judy Bess, in some of my classes at Carroll (we despised each other). I'm sure the snobettes have mellowed into pleasant society matrons who may occasionally even have done something useful. Except for Judy I don't remember them past 1962.

In the mid 1980s I met Treasure Nelson, whose recollections of the Jones House I've mentioned, and discovered she was one of the girls who summered in Mexico. I didn't know her then because while her family could afford it, the little snotbuckets didn't consider her

among the elite. They didn't voluntarily associate with her and treated her badly when they had to; unlike me, she couldn't insult and abuse them. I thought she would derive retro satisfaction from knowing how I'd treated them, but she was appalled, especially by the Ruthie incident.

Maybe it was partly because, if I remember correctly, she also attended that church when young; at any rate she was religious. That wasn't Treasure's only indirect connection with the Library. A friend I met in the tenth grade, Martin Faulkner, sometimes accompanied me to the Library and met staff members (and I once got him a date with Phyllis' younger daughter). He also went to that church, but I don't know if he knew Treasure. He dropped out of Del Mar and joined the navy.

Of Morelia, Treasure remarked that "the most beautiful boys" were there. I did think it peculiar that John would steal Egyptian art books since he showed little interest in that culture or its rigid artistic canons. The illustrations did reproduce scenes of sometimes hundreds of nude men working and celebrating. Sooner or later nearly every conversation touched on homosexuality, even if by humor. I recall some Library staff began to wonder about him after a while.

It wasn't acceptable at the time, and while I never considered assaulting someone for it and was civil to anyone I knew was queer I did think it was ridiculous. I don't know whether John was struggling

with himself or just putting up with prevailing attitudes, but either or both could explain his maliciousness. I didn't know for sure whether he was gay, but Treasure assured me that the girls knew all along.

In summer 1962 he left the Library to go to Texas Western in El Paso. We'd exhausted what interests we shared and usually found each other irritating. I did happen to be there on his last day. Likely so he could take a final look at the neighborhood we went to the vacant third floor from where John gazed out the north windows across Peoples Street. "I feel as though I'm leaving a part of myself behind here," he said. I assured him he was.

Unlike the case with most employees, I do know what became of John, even though after a few letters and a couple of visits we heard no more from him. He spent years as a professional student in Texas, Florida, and in Germany, racking up an impressive list of degrees. In 1985 he returned to NTSU in Denton, from which in 1973 he took a masters, where he taught religion and philosophy. He seems to have been very popular with students and faculty alike. John died of AIDS in 1993 and a scholarship fund was established in his name.

Of the other male staff from that era I remember almost nothing and have heard too little to construct a useful account. Doubtless I'm leaving out some interesting and worthy persons.

11

Phyllis Burson was Library Director during much of the time recounted here. Referred to as "the Madam" by staff (who called the Library "the rat house," "the nut house" and "the lie-brewery") she was much the typical executive of the era. She was important to the City in that she successfully completed the change from a laid back small town library to a professional city institution.

An overachiever and would be socialite, she was harassed by problems like the dopers and perverts in addition to the usual administrative and personnel situations while struggling to take care of her family. Self-driven to the point of distraction if not exhaustion, like John Kimmey she didn't believe in headaches though I suspect she ignored rather than didn't have them. I don't think she would mind my recounting how zany she could sometimes be because she had a sense of humor and liked people, and she does have the accomplishment of expanding and improving the Library.

Phyllis was tall with short graying hair that she always wore up. Though she limped because of her injured leg or him it didn't interfere with her bearing. She could be pleasant, cordial, even apologetic and could assume an air of authority as quickly as need be.

She chain smoked, which wasn't a social liability back then and could augment one's image. Her habit showed the depth of Phyllis' concentration (or distraction). I saw her numerous times at work with a smoldering cigarette between her fingers tipped by an impossibly long ash that by some miracle stayed on as she wrote, gestured, and answered the phone. Like as not another partial cigarette would be smoldering in an ashtray, like as not she would set the current one unfinished beside it to attend to yet more tasks, and light up another.

She wore plastic framed glasses secured by a neck strap. As I recall the lens frames were usually drop shaped, but since I also remember them as white, pink, pearly, and plain or set with rhinestones or incised designs she probably went through several pairs.

Often female staff laughed covertly at her clothes and accessories. I don't recall noticing much wrong though I do particularly remember her sometimes wearing one large pin or another tastefully situated in the upper left quadrant of a blouse or jacket. Quite likely I happened not to be present or else unaware of any egregious *faux pas*, and as likely the reports that reached me were the outcome of female pettiness.

Phyllis liked to wear wigs and sometimes hats. Most of her wigs were of such high quality that they wouldn't ordinarily have been distinguishable from real hair except that she frequently got them on wrong, even sideways. Even when they were perfectly situated she would inevitably, I heard, reach up with a pencil and scratch under them while talking to someone. I also heard, years afterward, that she bought a hat decorated with a mink tail, believing it the height of fashion while everyone else believed it the height of ridiculousness.

One morning she showed up with the back of her coat soaking wet. She explained that she'd noticed it was dirty, washed it, and put it on just before coming to work. She was said to wear the same clothes sometimes for days at a time without even taking the time to shower. Perhaps there's some validity to that accusation.

There's no question that Phyllis committed all manner of verbal atrocities ranging from mispronunciations and malapropisms to scrambled information. "Facade" she always pronounced "fak-cod," "spontaneous" she consistently rendered "spozmatic." She issued a dress code memo instructing female staff to wear coats that reached the *derriere*, but wrote that "All employees will wear suit coats that reach all the way to their dossiers."

When for some reason Phyllis was at the Reference Desk alone the phone rang and she took down the patron's question to be looked up by the Reference staff. At least it's possible to guess what the pa-

tron wanted to know; Phyllis had written, "Why, when Moses came down from the Sermon on the Mount, did he break all Ten Commandments?"

In November 1991, after she and my aunt were long retired, Nancy Rayburn told Phyllis that my aunt was going to have foot surgery. Phyllis said to "...be sure and let me know how the autopsy turns out."

I wonder if an awareness of this trait underlay another peculiarity. Though Phyllis updated Library equipment regularly, she insisted for years, maybe as long as she was there, that carbon copies be made and kept of all letters, memos, and other communications. She was certain that copy machines changed the words in a document.

Despite her administrative ability her assessments of people could be just as peculiar. Disliking Albert Heine because he lacked a college degree is pretty transparent in a socially ambitious person. She disliked City Manager Marvin Townsend because he sometimes stammered, which might also have something to do with her own verbal garbling. One evaluation greatly amused my aunt. Of Pat Murphy, an employee whose name I remembered when I heard it but nothing else about him, Phyllis confided to her that "he hasn't the potential to do much." He became State Librarian of Arkansas.

Phyllis was much concerned with status, judging people by her assessment of how much they had or how much they might attain. A

favorite phrase was "VIP," the abbreviation of "very important person," and she wanted to give those who "matter" a good impression. Today this sounds superficial and so it struck many at the time, but it was also accepted as a practical way to success even if one lacked ability. She was in step with the times and tried to keep up with the latest books, the latest styles, topics, whatever.

She tried never to miss a library convention because she enjoyed socializing and sought every opportunity to meet a VIP. On one trip she met Jesse Jackson at a party and bragged about it for weeks. She didn't always keep up with the 1960s, on one occasion to everyone's amusement. At a convention in, I think, San Francisco she saw a sign announcing a "Gay Party" and barged in. Enchanted by all the show business people she saw, she had a great time and when she returned talked for weeks about the "gay party." She was probably the only person at the Library who didn't know "gay" meant "homosexual."

Since Phyllis was an amazingly poor planner, at least of her own personal business, she would work out a complete itinerary with Nancy Rayburn, who would type up page after page detailing exactly where she would go when and what she would wear there. At one convention two pages stuck together and she wore the wrong outfit to a function.

Nancy ended up managing Phyllis' personal finances, even balancing her checkbook and doing her taxes. For a long time Phyllis was

in financial difficulties, but whether she was underpaid or overambitious I wouldn't venture a guess. She never kept ahead on her bills and often borrowed against her paycheck. My aunt, who was in charge of the Library's money, told me that Phyllis would take cash out of the funds and leave an IOU or check --- which of course was hot. She sometimes paid the money back but on many occasions she declared that she'd bought something for the Library, canceling the debt.

From what I heard she was adept at living beyond her means. She would get dresses on approval and modify them to suit herself. Now and then she even borrowed clothes from low level employees. She never failed to take advantage of free luncheons, stacking plates of food all along her arm like a waitress and more on top of them when she could. She sometimes got mad if an employee passed up free food, for example lunch with book salesmen (who tried their best to avoid Phyllis).

Yet it would be wrong to characterize Phyllis as simply a driven executive type willing to risk bankruptcy to appear more successful. She regularly paid Shorty's tab at the nearby hamburger stand and she paid some or all of his bills in the months after his wife died.

I would stop by Phyllis' office now and then just to talk for a couple of minutes. I suppose this created a good impression, especially since I dated her daughters, and worried my mother, but I did it because I actually enjoyed talking with her. Though almost always very

busy she was always friendly and seemed in her turn to enjoy the visits.

When I had a throat infection Phyllis gave my mother a card from the Joke Shop for me. The cover read "I hear you've been feeling pretty low" and the inside, under a cartoon face with a salacious expression, "Well, wash your hands!" She once sent me a late birthday card from the same store. On the cover under the word "Sorry" was a cartoon of a seedy looking fellow sitting and reading a psychology book with his fly unzipped (sans details); inside was printed "I forgot!" Not exactly cards you'd expect a middle aged woman in an important public position to send a teenaged boy, but nobody made anything of it because she was such a total screwball.

It was Theo Lynn I usually dated. We did walk around downtown and see afternoon movies if we both happened to be at the Library, but Mary Kay mainly just filled in a couple of dates. She was a lively athletic girl with a straightforward intelligence, wiry black hair, and an Indian cast of features. Theo Lynn looked softer and was indeed quite well grown at an early age. She had a light complexion abounding with moles, brown hair tinged reddish in sunlight, and a mind more deliberate and academic but no less sharp: she was an

honor student, Feature Editor of the Ray High newspaper, and a Girl Scout. If memory serves, none of the females in that family had earlobes.

The background of this isn't clear. Around 1964, when our situations were changed, Phyllis said to my mother, "Well, I've got two available daughters and you've got two grown sons..." She was a bit disgusted by the statement. Maybe she'd been humoring Phyllis for years.

Mary Kay went to the Island with us one Sunday, I think in 1961 and that she was thirteen. Both girls went with us to practice shooting on Oso Creek behind Rodd Field. This was common then, when the area was wild and unused. We had heavy caliber World War II rifles; at the first shot the girls screamed and covered their ears. They did shoot and did passably well and apparently this excursion was also a success.

Theo Lynn was the girl I most often dated in high school. Sometimes this was with family, Sundays when a favorite destination was the Motts' at Nuecestown. We went to football games, school dances, her church youth group, the era's typical teenaged activities. A couple of times Mary Kay filled in, once for some reason to a Carroll High prom. Once, as I noted, she was willing to go out with a friend of mine from there.

Yes, when I got my driver's license I proved I *could* find her house when only the girls were there. Yes, when she got hers and we both had to pick up our mothers at work we raced downtown. However, for this I'd discovered the key to getting there at a decent speed. Coming from Mansheim on Ayers, if you hit the first traffic light green and maintained a constant 32mph you would hit every light green through Six Points, left in front of Spohn Hospital, to the hill, and down Peoples Street.

Theo Lynn's school and Scout activities interfered with her dating. Phyllis told my mother she hoped I'd keep calling even when I knew she couldn't go out so she would be able to truthfully say the girl had to turn down so very many dates because she was so busy. When I mentioned this to John Kimmey he said, "I'm going to vomit."

Of course we sometimes quit seeing each other, or went out with other persons, and I spent time with guys I knew. Besides, she had social aspirations I cared nothing about. Once I told her to call me when she was free and she responded that "it isn't done." It was, though, by her, because she once called me, likely because the person she expected to ask her out didn't. I overheard Judy Bess in one of the classes we shared tell another girl I was going with Theo Lynn, adding, "I don't *believe* it!" Well, she saw it.

No doubt contrary to Phyllis' hopes, Theo Lynn and I never even discussed marriage. We knew we had different goals and inter-

ests. The teenaged dating phase of our acquaintance was over by early 1963, before either of us graduated. In a few months I'd met my future ex; in a year or so she'd met hers.

In 1966 Theo Lynn and her husband (whom Phyllis allegedly disliked) and my ex and I were in Austin and occasionally saw each other. He seemed like a nice guy who really cared about her; my ex hated her. For several years Theo Lynn and I crossed paths here and there. The last time I saw her, 1974 or 1975 when we were thirtyish, was at my parents' house. She'd come to visit family and friends before her second marriage. It was apparently successful and last I heard she was in Pennsylvania.

I saw Mary Kay in Austin in 1967 when she was about nineteen. I don't recall with whom or the circumstances but one evening I ended up at her apartment. I was struck by how she held her cigarette and leaned forward as she spoke with the exact gesture and imperious bearing of her mother. She set up a successful travel business, but as often as I've been to Austin I've never seen her since.

Phyllis' financial problems ended sometime in the mid 1960s when her mother had a traffic accident and received an enormous settlement. After that Phyllis and her family took lavish vacations in the Caribbean and Mexico. Unchanged, Phyllis mentioned to my mother

that she thought the girls ought to wear Gernreich's topless swim suits to attract possible husbands. Predictably, she rented townhouses in Austin where she and the girls lived like royalty and entertained VIPs.

I think she retired not too long after my mother, some time toward the mid 1970s. She was suffering from her own leg and hip troubles.

However excellent an administrator and however good at playing the social games she was, I doubt she'd have gotten as much done without Nancy Rayburn to take care of the details and the inevitable errors. Both deserve credit for the Library's growth during this time.

I last saw Phyllis at the opening of the Comanche Street Library. My brother and I were invited, since our mother had died in 1984. As we stood before the building while Luther Jones pontificated I saw Phyllis in the crowd to my left, sitting with a trace of her old bearing in a wheelchair. For a brief time she couldn't place me, then calmly remembered who I was; after all I probably wasn't twenty when she'd last seen me and was now past forty. We saw her during the reception looking over stacks and desks, talking with persons I didn't recognize. I don't know who she came with.

In the summer of 1989 my aunt visited Phyllis and found her cleaning out her house. She kept all the cards staff had sent her. In March of 1990 for her 76th birthday those who'd known her brought food and refreshments to her house and reminisced about old times.

After Phyllis' mother died --- her father had died some years before --- Theo Lynn stayed with her a while. They sold the house and Phyllis got an apartment. Her health continued to decline and she finally had to go to Austin where Mary Kay lived, though she hated to leave her friends. There, she passed away before the century.

12

During the early 1960s, when I was most involved, the Library expanded. It was then that the first branch library opened. This was the Parkdale Library, a circular building on the edge of the Parkdale Plaza parkinglot. It seems to have taken a while to build since I remember looking over the construction in different seasons.

Its opening was in 1962, spring or early summer if I recall correctly. Phyllis had gone everywhere in search of a blue dress that would match the tile inside the building. She finally found one that was at least adequate and then for some reason the ceremony was held outdoors. It was early evening, when there was still plenty of light but less heat. Theo Lynn's Girl Scout troop performed the flag raising, but I didn't see the entire opening because, I no longer know why, we were broken up at the time. I just watched from the parkinglot, took some pictures, and left.

Sometime around then Catherine Blodgett retired and my mother became Local History Librarian, a position she in turn held till she retired. Much of her time was now spent in the cluttered room that housed the old traffic and fire alarm controls.

A good part of this job consisted of showing patrons how to hunt genealogical clues in books, microfilm, and other sources. Most of these persons were older individuals in search of their real ancestry. Some few were a bit creative at "finding" distinguished forbearers, like the kid who concocted his descent from Julius Caesar through a series of royals.

She read much material out of curiosity as well as to be able to help patrons, and by the time she retired knew a great deal about Corpus Christi's past. She helped a number of persons research that subject but the only documentation I have of that is in the Acknowledgments of the 1972 volume *The History of Nueces County*. The authors thank "...Mrs. Mary Morrow, librarian of the Local History Room of the La Retama Public Library, who helped locate missing information and incomplete footnotes without number."

She also did much research for the City on various issues and projects. She sometimes prepared reports that were used in City Council meetings and may have ghostwritten some speeches and presentations. I don't know a lot about this because while she mentioned it on occasion she didn't go into any detail.

She also sometimes had to attend after hours Library meetings, usually held at someone or other's house. After I could drive I took her to a couple of these to save my father the effort after a hard day at his own job. Even with the refreshments I found them excruciatingly boring and paid little attention to anything but the time. I didn't think to ask my mother and aunt in later years about either the City reports or these meetings, so I'm unable to provide any details.

I seldom minded going to the Library, even when I regularly picked up my mother at six o'clock. In summer I might go downtown in the afternoon, in winter a couple of hours early. I might entertain one Judy or another, but what I most enjoyed was going through the "gift books."

People and institutions seem to have been especially generous during that time. Books would be piled for sorting in Local History's processing area or the extra room next to the restrooms or the meeting room between the hall and Cataloging. When I pass the park where La Retama stood I always think of summer afternoons and winter evenings I spent with the meeting room doors shut, isolated there with the smell of books and hum of air conditioning.

Since most gifts would be discarded it was understood that staff and their families could help themselves. Those books we wanted we carried out in brown paper grocery sacks. These sacks were general use tote bags of the day, and employees used them to carry lunch, extra sweaters and jackets, books, and more sacks.

I found many books I kept and many old items. A recurring book was Fitzgerald's translation of Omar Khayyam, illustrated by Dulac. It seems to have been a popular gift for several generations. There was the occasional rare book, a couple of which I still have. I found books printed in the 1800s and 1700s and some so old they were bound in goat or sheep skin. Some of these antiques the Library kept as examples of the development of bookbinding, others I kept and eventually presented to the Museum.

People forgot or just left things in books and boxes: notes, letters, valentines, greeting and business cards, receipts, ticket stubs, leaves, flowers, photos, even money. Some gave scrapbooks, school yearbooks, autograph books. I often pondered what lay behind these sentimental scraps. Once I found a set of autopsy photos of someone who had burned. Did they belong to a coroner? A police detective?

I've no idea what percentage of gift books were put in circulation and what percent torn up and thrown out. Probably only a small number were kept though at that time the Director and staff understood the proven worth of some old books and the historical value of others.

Besides taking gifts, staff members occasionally ordered books for themselves from the publishers at Library expense. Probably few mid and upper level employees did not at least a couple of times do that. Even with this and the other financial machinations there was always, as far as I know, enough money to order new books and replace those worn out.

Now and then the Library needed books, especially best sellers I would guess, sooner than orders could be filled. In this case, from the late 1950s into the early 1970s Phyllis would send my mother and aunt to Jerry McCord's bookstore, Del Mar Bookstore, to buy them. They would manage to get boxes of books into my aunt's car, which they would then park behind the Library in the Bookmobile space so someone could carry them in.

I spent less and less time at the Library after about 1964. I recall checking out some books in 1965 using a slip of paper with my mother's name on it. The girl on the Circulation Desk, whom I didn't know, looked startled and after checking them out asked if I wanted her to throw the slip away. I did not, and she returned it. Much of what happened after that is entirely what my mother or aunt told me.

At an out of town convention around 1968 a few female staffers repaired to a bar after a long day of meetings. Soon a man approached their table and asked if they'd like to join him and his friends. They declined but he was persistent to the point of being a pest. Finally one of them said that they were lesbians. That didn't faze the man at all, who said it was just fine.

Utterly exasperated, on the point of calling help, another of the staff started to explain that they were tired after a long day and didn't want company. "Look," she said, "we're librarians and --- " But that's as far as she got. The man stopped and left after profuse, embarrassed apologies.

Around 1970 local photographer Doc McGregor asked my mother if the Local History Department would take his vast collection of photographs of Corpus Christi. She brought the matter up to Phyllis, who said that the two of them would have to look through the collection. Because she was becoming increasingly disabled my mother couldn't negotiate the steps to McGregor's house, so Phyllis and my aunt went. According to my aunt, Phyllis riffled through a couple of boxes and announced that the Library couldn't use the pictures and wouldn't be able to afford them if it could. And that's why the McGregor photos ended up in the Museum.

Twice in the 1970s bank robbers fled into the Library. Once someone robbed a bank on the hill and ran downtown with the law in

hot pursuit, ditching the loot before he got to La Retama. Not knowing what had happened, my aunt asked if she could help him when the robber came in. He ran past her, first to the balcony, as the cops came in wielding pistols and shotguns. They chased and finally caught him after a struggle that knocked magazines off the rack. My aunt was miffed because the cops didn't apologize for the mess.

Another time my aunt and a young male employee heard on the radio that a nearby bank had just been held up. She told him to lock all but one of the front doors. The robber soon ran up and tried each door till he found the one left unlocked. He dashed through the main room carrying a sack, ran all around the Reference Room, then fled upstairs.

Again the cops burst in, finally trapping the robber in the stairwell that wrapped around the elevator shaft. He surrendered, but without the sack. The money was never found. Staff decided that the robber had made it to the third floor and tossed it out a window, maybe to an accomplice. Either nobody knows or somebody's not talking.

Like the Jones House, La Retama was accumulating wear and tear. It had to have suffered from hurricanes. I don't know how the building was prepared for storms, but certainly the extensive glass areas were boarded up. Likely there were external fittings for this and at

least some wood was stored, but I can't recall either. Also, I don't know what inside preparations were made. Though here when storms struck during this time, I can't recall hearing of damage to the Library.

My aunt told me that for one storm --- maybe in the late 1950s or maybe even Hurricane Carla --- Phyllis wanted her and a couple of others to stay in the Library. She pointed out that they might be marooned there for days without power, water, or food and wouldn't be able to repair anything, so Phyllis decided against it.

Routine use was the main culprit. I have some outside information on this. A family named Marshall owned an elevator business and maintained a number of elevators, including the Library's. One of them became the son-in-law of the Treasure Nelson who remembered the Jones House and knew John Kimmey. He told me the elevator we'd ridden so many times was in bad shape, a composite of parts that they could barely keep running.

Repairs sometimes caused damage. One time the roof was re-tarred, my aunt told me, and the tar was spread over the inlets to drains that ran through pillars inside the structure. Soon afterward there were heavy rains and the roof filled up with water, sagged from the weight, and began leaking into the building. The drains had to be unstopped with jackhammers, the noise reverberating through all the rooms for the week or so it took. When I heard that around 1980 the third floor

was used, for Cataloging I suppose, I wondered how much repairs cost.

Maybe Phyllis had the idea to build a new Main Library; but if so, like Mrs. Hardy, she didn't personally complete the project.

13

By the mid 1960s my mother's health was declining rapidly because of polio's lasting effects. Few victims escape without permanent damage, and her condition was probably worsened because she'd forced herself to walk with atrophied connective tissue and little fluid in the joints. That is, daily grinding bone on bone for decades. Every step, she said, required conscious attention and the wind downtown could knock her over.

Only in her forties, she began using a cane, then leg braces, and in less than a decade was spending more and more time in a wheelchair. Maybe by sheer determination she made it past twenty years, but finally was unable to go on. Her retirement party was on 18 December 1972 and her official last day was 31 January 1973. She was only fifty-four but aged an extra twenty years by the after effects of polio.

She could still do the things she really enjoyed but subsequent years brought a series of afflictions in addition to an existing thyroid condition: cancer, heart disease, stroke. All were effectively treated but she was finally unable to create the elaborate embroidery she'd learned as a bedridden child or pay attention to reading or even television. When she died we divided her huge doll collection as she'd wished, giving recent items to Driscoll Children's Hospital and those of artistic or historical value to the Museum.

I'd guess that Phyllis retired in 1974 or so, after twenty years. I probably heard about it but don't recall. According to my aunt someone named Whittaker took her place and was fired, followed by Mitzi Atkinson, who was "a temporary," and a Pierce "who got a better job."

Nancy Rayburn, who'd kept Phyllis' business together and running for so many years, stayed on though I don't know in what job. My aunt told me that in 1985 she filed a lawsuit to keep from being demoted and dropped in pay in favor of a younger woman and so "kept her position." She stayed in contact with former employees, keeping them up on the Library and each other. I don't know when she left. I saw her a couple of times at the new building, looking exactly the same as ever except that she had gray hair, and she's the only per-

son I know of who started at the Jones House and retired from Comanche Street.

My aunt mentioned a few other persons. She seems to have thought well of her secretary, Jessie Girard. Girard, incidentally, attended the Marshalls' church and would discuss church business with them as they serviced the elevator. When my aunt left, Girard took over her job. My aunt also had high regard for Aubrey George, who started not long before she left.

Otherwise she held that newer employees did far less work for a lot more money. Everyone says that, but in the case of civil service it tends to be true. Since the late 1950s the emphasis has been increasingly on hiring college degrees rather than motivated persons with common sense.

I found recent staff polite and helpful, though during the 1980s it sometimes took less time to drive downtown and look something up than call and ask for the information. Maybe it was administration who were hired for stupidity. Some yahoo, for example, decided to get rid of books dated before 1962 (why *that* year?), defeating a major library purpose of preserving the past. Marvin Townsend objected and so did most employees, who managed to hide and at least temporarily save many books. Gradually the books did get tossed and those remaining were dumped in the move to Comanche Street.

My aunt worked until March of 1977, a bit past twenty-five years since she applied at the Jones House on her lunch hour. She sometimes visited Phyllis, maybe a couple of other retirees, and Nancy Rayburn kept her up on things, but she was no longer really concerned with the Library. After my uncle died in 1987 she did volunteer work at the Museum, where she spent hours sorting the McGregor photos. During the 1990s she sometimes reminisced about her career and related a great deal of what I've set down here. Although she had some medical problems she didn't suffer the series of illnesses her sister had, instead becoming increasingly frail as she approached age eighty. In 2000 she moved to Seguin, where her daughter lived.

Probably few people now remember the Jones House and the number who worked at and used La Retama must be dwindling. That both buildings have been destroyed no doubt makes forgetting easier. I sometimes wonder how many people, when they happen to pass those sites, now feel the way John Kimmey said he felt on his last day at the Library....

Corpus Christi, Texas
January - July 2002

Copies of
A Quarter Century at the Library

\$ 35.00 each

**Textar Media, Inc.
P. O. Box 7308
Corpus Christi,
Texas 78467-7308**